

MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, October 2021
Adam Contos: CEO of RE/MAX
Mind-Body Business



Adam Contos is Chief Executive Officer of RE/MAX, responsible for providing strategic direction on all aspects of major RE/MAX corporate decisions, operations, and company resources.

Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, this unconventional leader is refreshingly clear about the intersection of mind, body, and business for a holistic approach to success. Adam believes we become less successful and effective because we are diluted through distraction: what are we paying attention to? You'll love Adam's definition of entrepreneurship and his messages about endurance, credibility, and personal branding.

Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to this wonderful issue of MASTERS. I'm sitting here with Adam Contos, who I'm going to share with you a little bit more information about who this amazing man is but let me just tell you now, just buckle yourself in. Do not think that you can multitask right now. First of all, there's no such thing as multitasking. You will want to be present because I have spent time with this man, I've done research, I've watched his videos, I'm stalking him a little bit, and I think that you're going to be so, so blessed because of the wonderful message of this wonderful man. So, let me just tell you who he is. I'm going to read this, obviously. Adam grew up in Denver, studied criminal justice and earned an Executive MBA from the University of Denver. He served in the U.S. Marine Corp Reserves from 1990 to 1996 and was honorably discharged as a sergeant. From 1993 to 2004, Adam worked for the Douglas County sheriff's office in Colorado, advancing through a number of positions including deputy sheriff, corporal/investigator, sergeant of Court Services and Detentions Division, SWAT tactical commander; man, you are impressing me right now. Adam joined RE/MAX in 2004, was promoted to COO in 2016 and in 2018 to CEO, again of RE/MAX. His responsibilities as chief executive officer include providing strategic direction—oh my gosh, that's important—strategic direction on all aspects of major RE/MAX corporate decisions, operations, and resources of the company. So Adam, that's a mouthful. How'd you get to where you are today?

Adam: Well, I don't know, Winn. I was hoping you could help me figure that out but, you know, little successes at a time, helping people every day and working my way through it.

Winn: That's kind of how it is, right? You just kind of put your head down, you do the right thing, you work hard, you hustle, hustle, hustle, and I love that word. Some people think that there's some negative connotation to the word *hustle*, to the meaning of the

word *hustle*. I use it in the best meaning possible and I'm hustling just as much today as I was 30, 40 years ago. Do you find the same thing?

Adam: Absolutely and I'm going to reciprocate this stalking thing, Winn. I've been watching you as well and you've got as much hustle as anybody I have ever met, so kudos to you, my friend, and I'm honored to be on here, so thanks for having me here.

Winn: Well, do you see yourself slowing down with that hustle or does the hustle change as you become a parent or have a dog or have different responsibilities or as you get older? How does that hustle change for you?

Adam: I think the foundation of the hustle is enthusiasm and our desire to do better. Aging, our energy level, whatever it might be, I don't think necessarily affects the hustle. I think it's our intentions affect our hustle and if we start getting distracted or decide, no, I'm not going to give my effort or my attention to something, or my focus, that's where it starts to decrease. So, I actually find that as I progress in life, I learn what I shouldn't be doing and it allows me to increase that hustle in the places that I should be focusing.

Winn: I like that, you learn where you shouldn't be focused on; what you shouldn't be doing. I find that myself, that sometimes the older I get, it's not so much that I need to learn a lot of things, which I do, but a lot of it is that I need to unlearn lots of things.

Adam: Ah, totally, yeah. You know what's interesting is when you get to the point that—let's take you, for example, the businesses that you're involved in, the community, things like that. It's funny because we used to always say yes to everything, thinking we're going to disappoint somebody by saying no. But, actually, when we start to say no to those that we can't pay all that hustle and that attention to, it takes away from the things that we really want to be hustling on. Saying no as we age, we get better at it, I believe, and the experiences that we create allow us to say, "Nope, I'm focused on these three things, because these are what's best for my business, myself, and my community," and that allows us to hustle in those.

Winn: What a great message that is. I was talking with a very powerful, successful businesswoman a while ago and that's what she said; that as she turned, I don't know what age it was, 50 or 60, whatever, she said that she gave herself the gift of being able to say no. And I waited until I had my daughter and in the beginning it was just like an excuse, like, *Well, oh no, I can't make it because I have to be at my daughter's kindergarten class*. That was an acceptable excuse, so to speak, and of course people would say, "Ah, good for him." But now I'm like, wait a minute, that's actually a good thing. I think that gives me credibility, as a leader, that I know when to say no.

Adam: Ah, exactly and it's interesting you bring that up because I found that—I had a two-hour meeting this morning with a great community leader and that's what we ended up kind of focusing on. What we fell into was, what are the things we shouldn't be doing in order to be doing the things we should be doing? You're always going to

have haters. You're always going to have people who go, "Ah well, you ought to look at my thing." And they want their pet project to be your key focus, but the reality is we all have our key focuses and that's where we need to align our businesses, our lives, our personal foundations, our families; things like that. All those things have to line up and if we're just very haphazard with how we make our decisions, we essentially are losing our emotional maturity here. And that's what we should be developing as we gain experience, is emotional maturity and choice management in order to do the best that we can with everything we focus on.

Winn: How often do you have to inspect yourself or check yourself when it comes to your alignment or emotional maturity, as you call it?

Adam: I'll tell you what, Winn, I do it almost every day. I have my journal and my planner and I really take it to heart when I sit down and look at my day and my week and how I have those things lined out and I go through and double check those and say, "Is this what's best for me to be working on?" And if I have to pause and question it, generally it's going to be a no and I kind of wonder, why did I get on there? And I'll talk to my—I have an amazing assistant and she'll be really truthful with me and say, "No, that's not something you really need to be doing. I'm going to take it and move that." So, it really has to do with your ability to be vulnerable with yourself and with somebody else and have those clear discussions.

Winn: That vulnerability that you talk about, do you find that, oh my God, now you're the CEO of a very powerful company, which, by the way, I'm going to jump back into this story. Somehow I just skipped ahead; imagine that. Does your circle—you said that you have an assistant that says, "No, Adam we're going to say no to that." What does that circle look like for you, that inner circle? Is it a large circle, is it a small circle? Who does it include and how much permission do you need to give to them so that they tell you, "No, Adam you need to refocus over here"?

Adam: Oh, I think it actually gets smaller, Winn. I mean we have nearly 140,000 agents in the RE/MAX network—

Winn: Wait! How many?

Adam: Nearly 140,000.

Winn: Is that worldwide?

Adam: Yes.

Winn: Wow!!

Adam: Yeah, it's in 110 countries and territories, 8,600 franchise locations, and that could be a heavy draw if I said, "Hey, everybody send me an email and I'll answer it." If you create the leadership presence where people respect the fact that you're better not being overwhelmed with things so that you can focus, then your circle will allow you to work with just the few people that you need to in order to accomplish the largest

things possible. So, I always tell people, “Hold your hand out and spread your fingers out.” That’s the number of people that you should actively be communicating with in a week,” is like five or six people at the most. So, just a handful of people, is what I call it. Your handful of influencers.

Winn: Wow.

Adam: And if you’re working with those people, you’re going to get the most done because you’re going to be very selective about who that handful of people is.

Winn: This is such a great message. You can talk to me, just to me right now, because this is such a powerful message because, you know, I’m the type of person that I want to save everybody. I want to be available for everybody. I want to avoid as many haters as I possibly can. But what you’re saying is, you’re not going to have the leadership presence that you absolutely need, to have that credibility, and that’s a big word that you and I like, as well. So, thanks for that.

Adam: You’re absolutely right, Winn. If you view leadership as something that can be diluted, it’s diluted through distraction. And if we’re going to allow our leadership to be diluted, we’re not going to be able to deliver high-quality leadership to anybody, anyplace. So, don’t let it be diluted and you’re delivering a better product in your leadership that you essentially scale after that because those that are in that handful of people will go and magnify it for you.

Winn: I just wrote that down: diluted through distraction. Your language here and your words are powerful and I have a feeling that you worked hard to craft that, to develop that skillset of how you communicate, correct?

Adam: Absolutely. Yeah, communication is incredibly powerful for a leader and storytelling, communication, your ability to articulate the words that mean something to people, words like *kindness*. It’s interesting: I’ve been studying this—the surveys of what three words do businesses really need to lean on right now and understand, and that’s trust, safety, and inclusion. When you take a look at those things and roll those into your values and your focus, people become respectful to your ability to say no and you wanting to be focused on the things that meet your values, that meet trust, safety, and inclusion in your communication to your customers and to your friends. So, you’re right, Verbiage, copywriting, the words that you use and how you deploy those, I think is very important because it shows that you respect the people you’re giving them to.

Winn: I like that you’re focused on the importance of communication because what I find is, as leaders—and again, all of us are leaders—if we’re not properly communicating or communicating enough or using the right terminology or that our leadership is distracted, then what happens is people make stuff up. If we’re not communicating then they’re just going to make stuff up and oftentimes what they make up is doom and gloom. They make up the worst scenario, the worst story. Why? Because they’re

not hearing hope, they're not hearing trust, safety, and inclusion from the boss, from the leader.

Winn: Ah, so true. So, when you look at the emotions that people operate on—and most people operate on one of two emotions. All the psychologists and everybody will say there's about 10 or 12 emotions, but the reality is they fall into two categories. One is fear, which is our default emotion, which you're talking about people kind of lacking clarity and they're falling into fear because of the overwhelm that they're experiencing in society. The noise, the distractions. the different things that they can't find an answer for. So, when we don't communicate clearly, people fall into fear. When we communicate clearly, we are giving to them. We're giving them the things that they need in order to have the confidence and clarity to go live their lives better. And that confidence and clarity and the giving behind that comes from the emotion of love. Love is unconditional giving. So ultimately we're living either in love or fear. And when you look at people and how they react, which one is it? You can tell. Do they have a smile on their face, are they like, "Yes, this is great"? That's love. Or are they going, "But Adam, but Winn, I don't get it. I don't like this"? That's fear because they're going into this fight, flight, or freeze response. They don't like what they're hearing because they don't have clarity and direction on it. So that's why we have to choose our words very clearly in order to move them to that emotion of love, because we're giving them value.

Winn: You know, you have a lot of mind, body, business content out there on your Facebook, on your website. How do those three pillars intersect for you personally, in your leadership style, but as well as in how you lead RE/MAX, your company?

Adam: Great question, Winn. The reality is if you don't lead yourself, you can't lead somebody else intrinsically and holistically. You have to hold the mirror and say, "Am I leading myself well?" You talk about mind, body, business. Ultimately our lives are like a wheel. If you envision it as a circle, a third of it is business, a third of it is mind, a third of it is body, and we have to contribute to all of those every day, to a maximum. If we decide to skip one of them, that circle becomes a flat tire and nothing happens. So if you wake up in the morning and you're like, "I'm going to eat terribly, I'm not going to exercise, I'm not going to focus on my health and wellbeing, and I'm not going to focus on my relationships," your business is going to suffer. The reality is, when you look at that and you just think of those three words—mind, body, business—am I contributing at the maximum level? And it doesn't have to be difficult it just has to be contribution to those things. If you think that way and understand it and can hold up that mirror and reflect that you've done those things each day, all of them, we'll find success.

Winn: Do you mind if I ask you, of those three—mind, body, business, and of course you mentioned health and wellness and relationships and all that—which area do you tend to struggle with the most?

Adam: Honestly, Winn, I don't struggle with any of those. I am happy with where I am in all of those because I work on them constantly. I mean, I'm always thinking about my kids,

my wife, my dogs, my friends. I pick up the phone and call people and say, “Hey, I just wanted to check in with you. How are you doing today? I haven’t talked to you in a day or two.” I call my kids and I FaceTime them so I can see them on video and I go, “I love you and I just wanted to say hello.” I tell my wife I love her at least three times a day. I spend moments with my dog. I spend mindful moments with myself. And then I always focus on my health and my wellbeing. Physically, I exercise, meditate, stretch, and I eat well. And then I work on my business; I touch base intentionally in that. And then I also give back to my community and touch base in my community giving efforts. I’m not struggling with any of them. I’m very happy and content with where I’m at and continue to moving forward.

Winn: Isn’t that funny? In today’s world, as you say that, I’m like, *Good for him!* I’m like cheering in the background. I’m celebrating that, but isn’t that funny, in today’s world, as you say that, there you go, a bunch of haters. *Well, who does he think he is to say that he doesn’t struggle in any of those areas?* Do you find that that’s the case sometimes?

Adam: Absolutely! And you know what I have to say to them? I love their passion for my wellbeing. Really. Winn, if somebody comes up and criticizes you, just look at them and go, “I love your passion for my wellbeing.”

Winn: [Laughs]

Adam: And they want to punch you in the nose or something like that, but it’s a reality. What am I supposed to say? *Oh, you’re right. I’m miserable.* But that’s not how I want to live my life. It’s not their choice on how happy I am.

Winn: That’s a great line right there. Okay, so give us tips for our listeners, because, again, all of us are leaders, all of us have influence, even if your influence is just with your dog, or your influence is with your family, with your roommates. Maybe your influence is with a small team of people. You’re not the boss, you’re not the leader, but you are a contributor to that team. So, give us some tips on how we integrate these healthy habits into our lives.

Adam: I think it’s important that people understand that you just can’t say it; you have to do it. And if you were at my house at 4:30 this morning, you’d say, “Oh he’s right, he is up at 4:30 a.m. Oh, he just got home from the gym, he’s having his spinach smoothie. Oh, there he is with his dog. Oh, there he is meeting with community representatives.” If you can’t live the life, then don’t talk the life. And it’s a struggle. I’ll be the first one to say I’ve done the “I want to do this, I want to do that” before, but the reality is, write it down and go check it off after you do it and go, “Whoa, that worked.” But it is a lot of work, don’t get me wrong. You just can’t sit on the couch and have these things happen during the day. That’s not what creates success. Action creates success and the action has to be in alignment with your values, whatever your values are. If you’ve got bad values, your actions are going to be in alignment with your bad values and you’re going to see the results of that. But it compounds over time. And my statement to everybody would be write it down,

benchmark it against your values, and go do it. And then double check and say, “Did I do it, can I make it better?” and live your successes.

Winn: That 4:30 a.m. time, what does that look like for you? You said, it’s the gym, it’s the spinach smoothie. And then give some advice to those listening right now because you go to the gym at 6:00 a.m. and it’s not filled with a bunch of losers. It’s filled with a bunch of people who have that same mindset, and I love that energy and I feed off of that as well. And then I was listening to a mentor recently saying, “Sorry, you can’t do that 4:30 a.m. time,” which we all know is valuable, “if you’re still staying up at midnight.” So can you give us a shoutout and some call to action on that?

Adam: Absolutely! There are a few things that are really important in your life. There’s movement, there’s nutrition, and there’s sleep. And if you look at—for your body, movement, nutrition, and sleep have to be three pillars that you include in that. And if you’re not getting the appropriate amount of sleep, you almost kind of have to ask yourself why. What happens after 9 p.m.? Are you binge watching something, or whatever it might be? But what are you getting out of that? Is it just to take up time because you’ve convinced yourself you can’t go to sleep at 9:30 or 10:00? But the reality is you have to intentionally do these things. Everything in life is intentional and when you’re intentional, happiness starts occurring more and more because you’re scoring points for yourself. I guess for lack of a better term, Winn, first of all, kudos to you for being a great dad. I know you love and care for your daughter so much and you’re present, which is absolutely amazing. We need more parents like you, so thank you, my friend, for being a present, intentional parent. The reality is that’s what we have to do with our betterment. We have to be present and intentional, and this staying up until midnight thing: my question is why?

Winn: [Laughs] I can’t. I try. I just can’t.

Adam: Yeah.

Winn: I want to switch gears here a little bit. Define for us entrepreneurship, because lots of people want to call themselves entrepreneurs but of course they don’t want to take the risk, they don’t want to hustle, they don’t want to make the sacrifices that it makes, they don’t want to be responsible for the fact that they’ve got to make payroll and what does that mean to them and to their personal happiness and wellbeing. Can you define entrepreneurship?

Adam: I think entrepreneurship is self-driven creation of wealth. If you can go out and find something—a product or service that allows you to create income—you’re an entrepreneur. Ultimately, when it comes down to it, it doesn’t occur easy. It’s like this catch phrase: *I’m an entrepreneur, I’m a CEO*. You know, there’s more CEOs right now than there ever have been in history.

Winn: [Laughs] And life coaches. There’s life coaches everywhere.

Adam: Oh my gosh, yeah. Have you ever done it? No, but I’m a coach for it.

Winn: Right.

Adam: Well great, that's fantastic. It's kind of fun when you look at it that way but you're right. There are two parts to being an entrepreneur, Winn. First of all, can you make money on your own and the second one is do you have the endurance to make it over the chasm, which is when you run out of customers and have to go get more that don't know you right now. I was having this conversation last week with some friends who are entrepreneurs. They started a great software company and they sold to everybody they knew and now they're trying to go find out if people who don't know them want to buy their product. And I said, "That's called a chasm," and it's lonely, it's frustrating, and 80% of people don't make it through that. But if you have the intestinal fortitude to continue to go out and face those no's and turn those into opportunities, you will get there. And that's what truly makes an entrepreneur, is that endurance above and beyond the beginning. It's like being a professional athlete. They started as an amateur like everybody else and they had the endurance and the fortitude to put in those extra hours, the 10,000 hours to get past that point that everybody else stopped.

Winn: I love that word, *endurance*. And by the way, I don't think that there's any guilt with—the definition that you just gave for entrepreneurship, I don't think that there's any guilt in saying, "You know what? Based on what Adam just said, I'm not an entrepreneur and I just want to fit in. I just want to join somebody else who is the entrepreneur." I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I find, because I work a lot in the philanthropy world, lots of people want to start a nonprofit and usually I'm like, "You know what? Why start your own when you can join somebody? Find somebody who's already doing a really, really good job because they already went through the heartache of setting it up as a nonprofit and the 501(c)(3) filing and the money and the heartache to get this thing going. How about if you just join them in what they're already doing? So, I don't know if I have a question in that. Do you have any thoughts on that?"

Adam: I think you're right, Winn. There's no shame in helping others, helping other people achieve their entrepreneurship desires. I mean, the reality is we can't have everybody in society trying to go out and try and do their own thing independently. It just doesn't work. So, we have to have giants out there. I call it standing on the shoulders of giants, which is, you start the company, you create an environment where people can be as successful as they want to be, and you take the entrepreneur risk but they come in and help you overcome that risk. Those are the unsung heroes in a lot of businesses. You know, those that come in and keep the lights on for the entrepreneur that can go, "Hey, Winn, I see that you have these gaps in your time, your capability, whatever, I can fill that gap. I want to be an employee of yours," and you go, "Come on, come help me." So, we get to stand on the shoulders of giants as business leaders and those giants are appreciated. So, you're right, there's no shame in that whatsoever. In fact, it's an honorable thing to go in and help somebody grow their business because you get to reap the benefits of that without the substantial risk that they're taking. And they have different rewards than you, but you have security in part of yours.

Winn: Oh, what a great message. You just gave me lots of peace of mind with that answer. For me, somebody who does take that risk often, to me there's nothing better than a team member that says, "You know what, Winn? I've got this. I've got this." And that's like, *Ahh*. I need those people so that's such a great description that you just gave but that actually takes us into another wonderful topic, and that is the idea of personal branding. So, I'm not the boss, the company's not named after me, but is personal branding still important?

Adam: Absolutely. What is a personal brand or what is a brand, to begin with? As you know with all of your business ventures, a brand is trust: trust that I know what I'm dealing with when I'm getting who this person is, what they represent, their values, things of that nature. Personal branding is the same thing and what you're doing is you're being vulnerable in putting yourself out there and letting people attach to that. And when we build that interpersonal relationship with a brand, either a personal brand—and, I mean, I love your big W on your personal brand. I mean, you see it and you go, "Oh, that's Winn." You look at it and go, "All right, I trust that. When I see Winn's brand I trust that I know the values of this individual." I think that's important in society, especially if you're a business leader, if you're building a business, things of that nature. Not everybody needs a personal brand but if you're trying to connect on a broad scale, and scale that even more, it's pretty important because we recognize that more than a name.

Winn: You know, as we start to wrap this up and people are thinking, *What do you mean, wrap it up, Winn?* Usually, I settle in for a good hour or more with you but Adam and I decided we were going to keep this short and sweet today. As we start to wrap this up, looking at 2021, considering everything that we've been through in the last year with social unrest and injustices and the pandemic and so many other changes on this planet, what do you think consumers will expect of the brands that they choose to support, moving forward?

Adam: I'll go back to those three words that I put out earlier: trust, safety, and inclusion, I think, are the first three. And they want the trust because they see clarity and transparency in an organization and understand that you're kind, caring, in your organization. You're good people and you're operating with the best of intentions. Safety: obviously, we have to care about each other. We have to care about each other's feelings, each other's wellbeing. You think about the pandemic. Does your organization care about my safety? And I'm not saying go overboard or be incredibly virtuous about something. I'm talking about let's all just be nice to each other and care about "Does this work for you?" And then inclusion, obviously, we need to make sure that we focus on equality and inclusion in society. And we're going through these cycles right now. As human beings, we go through cycles of, you know, you look at like economic cycles, you look at environmental cycles, you look at all these different cycles that happen out there. And we, as people, learn about ourselves and each other and we take extremes to make adjustments in those and we need to understand. Look, we've all made it through many presidents, we've made it through many political changes, we've made it through many—if you're in business—business changes, supply changes, thought changes in society; could be disasters,

natural or human made. But if we have the right direction, we're all going to get there together and be better for each other in the end.

Winn: Oh, this is great. When I said in the beginning that I have stalked you, I have literally a couple of pages of quotes of yours. Things like: *Leaders who don't model the behavior really aren't leaders at all. Always choose action over distraction. Failure is nothing more than an opportunity to grow.* These quotes from you just go on and on and I'm so grateful for this leadership that you have. I'm grateful, also, that you have the power that you have: that you stand on a very, very large stage. Even though it's just with that organization, you better believe it's making a difference in other organizations as well. So, Adam, congratulations.

Adam: Thank you, Winn, and I just have to say that I'm honored to call you friend and to have had you on my podcast and we've built this relationship here and I look forward to continuing it and whatever I can do to help you or your listeners, please feel free to reach out and let's all be better together.

Winn: This will be included in the marketing that I do for you but how can people track you down? How can they find you?

Adam: I'm on Facebook and Instagram: remaxadamcontos or adamcontosceo. There aren't a whole lot of Adam Contos's out there, is the beauty, so just fire into Google "Adam Contos" and you'll certainly find me.

Winn: Beautiful. Adam, thank you so, so much. Incredible.

Adam: Thank you, Winn. I send my love and my very best to you and your daughter, of course, and your whole team there.

Winn: Thanks, Adam.